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AUTHOR Rank, Hugh
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ABSTRACT

Too many people become disillusioned by political language because they start with illusions about it--erroneous ideas and unrealistic expectations. It is better to start with realistic attitudes, practical information, and not-so-great expectations. When dealing with political language, expect (1) conflict, arguments and disagreements, and dissent; (2) compromises and concessions, so be sure to define the areas in which negotiation is an option; (3) persuasion to be a mutual transaction; (4) one-sided arguments; (5) from those speaking to the "haves" a conservative rhetoric stressing protection; (6) from those speaking to the "have-nots" a progressive rhetoric stressing relief; (7) no sure or simple test for "truth"; (8) money to play a major role in human activities; (9) attitudes to develop or change with increased experience and knowledge; and (10) difficulty in clarifying issues, setting priorities, or resolving conflicts. Be disillusioned, but not discouraged. Lose illusions, but not courage. (HTH)

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Not-So-Great Expectations

Hugh Rank

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Not-So-Great Expectations

Too many people get *disillusioned* by political language because they start with *illusions* about it — erroneous ideas and unrealistic expectations. It's better to start with realistic attitudes, practical information, and not-so-great expectations.

- Expect **conflict,** arguments, disagreements. If you believe in freedom, then expect dissent. Silence, lack of opposition, is often the sign of imposed dictatorship.
- Expect **compromises,** concessions, trade-offs, deals: *most* issues are negotiable, but some (dealing with principles or absolutes) may not be. Define the areas in which negotiations are possible for you.
- Expect very few clear-cut **choices** between "good" and "bad": most problems involve the *greater-of-two-goods* or the *lesser-of-two-evils;* most arguments are about *degree* (how much) or *priority* (what should be done first).
- Expect people to agree about **general goals** (We all seek the "good"), but to disagree about **specific means.** Expect politicians to use *generalities,* so that their audiences will imagine their own *specifics.*
- Expect most political language to be **persuasion** *(not coercion)* using words *(not weapons)* to get others to do something: to vote for, to support, to agree with, the politician, the party, or the policy.
- Expect persuasion to be a **mutual transaction** between benefit-seekers and benefit-promisers. Expect all people to be **benefit-seekers;** expect all persuaders to be **benefit-promisers:** Advertisers usually offer *individual* benefits ("you'll be happy, beautiful, beloved . . . if you buy XYZ") and politicians offer *social* benefits ("We'll have more peace, prosperity, lower taxes, fuller employment . . . if you support XYZ.")
- Expect politicians to make certain claims about themselves: basically, they seek to project the **image** of being *trustworthy, competent,* and *benevolent* ("on your side"); in attacks, they charge that opponents are *untrustworthy, incompetent, self-seeking.*
- Expect **self-righteousness** in conflicts. Advocates often claim *knowledge* and *virtue* for self, and charge opponents with *ignorance* (unintentional, misguided, dupes) or *malice* (intentional, evil, plots, conspiracies).
- Expect **one-sided arguments.** When people advocate their own position (policy, party, candidate), they will intensify their own "good" and downplay their own "bad."
- Expect people to **downplay** their own "bad" by *omitting* unfavorable information, by using *"softer" language* (euphemisms), by *diverting* attention, or by *obscuring* it with jargon, confusing words, or complicated statistics.
- Expect persuasive messages starting with a **problem** (a threat feared) will end, offering a **solution.** (Do this . . . vote for X.) Expect **problems** to be intensified during election campaigns (and at budget time): *the greater the problem, the more the need for the solution.*
- Expect, from the **Haves,** a conservative rhetoric stressing *protection* (keep the "good") and *prevention* (avoid the "bad").
- Expect from the **Have-Nots,** a progressive rhetoric stressing *relief* (change the "bad") and *acquisition* (get the "good").
- Expect many political messages to be simple **repetition** of names, pictures, key words, symbols, slogans; such items often trigger a cluster of associated ideas.
- Expect common use of the **association** technique which links (1) the person, party, or policy with (2) something *already* loved or desired by (3) the intended audience. (In attacks: with something *already* hated or feared.) Thus, the importance of surveys, polls to find out what the target audience likes.
- Expect that ideals of accuracy and truth are not always reached: at times, people — including politicians — can make **errors,** be **uninformed,** or deliberately **deceive.**
- Expect no sure or simple test for "truth": **any** statement can be a lie; **any** behavior can be deceptive.; **any** person can deceive or be deceived.
- Expect people in power to intensify their own "good" usually by means of a large "public relations" department. From the press releases of the White House, the State House, and City Hall, expect the only news to be "good news."
- Expect **money** to play a major role in human activities, including persuasion and politics. "Follow the dollar" is good advice for investigators seeking to trace power, analyze budgets, expose corruption.
- Expect to see some slick, well-planned, conscious, purposeful persuasion from some sources, but also some random, strident, irrational, and crazy talk from others. Not all people are wired the same; some have a few loose screws!
- Expect **your own** attitudes to develop or change as you have more experience, more knowledge, and more understanding of history, sociology, and psychology.
- Expect it to be **difficult** (sometimes impossible) to sort things out, clarify issues, understand each other, set priorities, or resolve conflicts; yet, such constant efforts are vital to a free, democratic society.

Be disillusioned, but not discouraged:
Lose your illusions, but not your courage.

Not-So-Great Expectations was written by Professor Hugh Rank (Governors State University, Illinois) after asking many students what they didn't like about the language of politics: *"it's all lies . . . they're always making promises . . . they're always arguing, criticizing or complaining about something."* In response, Rank re-affirms some important, but unspoken, premises and assumptions about the **form, content,** and **context** of language and politics in a free society.

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